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ABSTRACT

Parent involvement in their children's education has been well established as an important component of academic success. To explore this phenomenon, parents were invited into the classroom to participate in a regular lesson so as to determine if such participation would enhance their perception of education and subsequently increase students' daily attendance. The research involved 150 students from kindergarten, first, second, and fifth grades and the students' parents. Parents were invited into the classroom to team with their child in a typical classroom lesson for one hour, one day each month. Parents sat next to their children and actively gathered information, solved problems, and made decisions. The findings suggest that the parents' attitudes toward school undergo a gradual positive change when parents become involved in classroom lessons. Between group comparisons of the attendance records of treatment and control groups indicate that there were positive effects associated with parent involvement in regular classroom lessons. Students and teachers also exhibited positive changes in attitude, and a stronger sense of community was formed. (Contains 31 references.) (RJM)

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You Can't Educate An Empty Chair:
Increasing Student Attendance Through Parent Involvement in Regular Classroom Lessons

The idea that school/family partnerships educate the modern child more completely than the individual efforts of either institution is so compelling today that it has become a national cry. The concept, however, is neither new nor startling; throughout time each institution has relied on the other for help providing children with the necessary life skills. For example, colonial parents recognized the need for all their children to read in English and banded together to take a substantial step forward in the development of primary schools (Spring, 1994). The Puritan School Law of 1647 was decreed to promise every township an appointed schoolmaster to help those children acquire the language (Benton, 1968).

As the colonists molded a new identity they knew the purpose of education expanded beyond individual literacy; it would be a vital tool for forging independence. Secular schools were established, and freedom to think became important (Johansen, Johnson, & Henniger, 1993). As the concept of universal education began to take hold, young and children of varied backgrounds were admitted into public schools, and citizenry envisioned schools as institutions for improving society (Spring, 1994). Such dreams prompted a common acceptance of school as the most able partner to prepare students for life and parents gradually began to relinquish their role as the child's first teacher to the school (Spring, 1994).

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Today, with increasingly complex lifestyles and family pressures, parents target the school as the most valuable resource for the unfolding of their child (Lay-Doper, 1994). While grammar schools and institutions of higher learning are a valuable resource, the viewpoint that they are the panacea for personal and social problems is not valid. Rapid societal development has precluded the possibility that professional educators alone can prepare students for success in our increasingly sophisticated world (Johnson, et al., 1993). Undeniably, the collaborative work of university, school, and family serve society best. Current studies strongly suggest that the most accurate predictor of student success is the extent to which families become engaged in the educational process (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Although the structure of the American family has changed in the last few decades, its members still value one another, and its children still need parental support (Elkind, 1995). From family, children find the love and support necessary to sustain them through disappointments, and the encouragement they need to press forward (Hunter, 1994; White-Hood, 1994). Bronfennbrenner (1984) refers to the child and family as an ecological package. When family goals dovetail with the school agenda students are more successful (Christenson, Rounds, & Franklin, 1992; Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Over the past decade, there has been a deluge of programs and activities organized by school and community to unite parents and educators (Henderson & Berla, 1994). For the first time in history, March 31, 1994, the federal government wrote the concept into law. Goals 2000: Educate America Act directs every school to promote partnerships with parents (Department of Education, 1994). In schools across the nation there is a new excitement in creating ties that bind (Daniels, 1996). Studies suggest that parents and teachers who support one another produce students who are: 1) high achievers, 2) more likely to attend school faithfully, 3) less likely to be in special education classes, and 4) more inclined to enroll in postsecondary education (Henderson and Berla, 1994). Parents involved in

partnerships develop more confidence in their schools, their children, and themselves, and their regard for teachers increases. Schools and society also benefit; teacher morale and motivation increases, and, as a consequence, so does community spirit (Daniels, 1996).

Schools encourage family partnerships in a wide array of activity, ranging from inviting parents to be spectors, volunteers, and teachers-at-home to involving parents in decision-making (Brandt, 1996; Gough, 1995). Although the benefit of parent-teacher interaction is readily acknowledged, there is general indication that with the exceptions of reporting classroom procedures, grades, or behaviors teachers infrequently include parents in their agenda (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Roeser, 1995). Evidence suggests they may be fearful parents will scoff at their strategies, criticize their teaching style, or challenge the curriculum they teach (Daniels, 1996; Roeser, 1995; Scherer, 1996). In spite of the truth that may accompany those fears, there is far more consensus than disagreement about the advantages of parental involvement in the educational process (Dauber, & Epstein, 1993; Green & Sancho, 1990).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine whether inviting parents into the classroom to participate in a regular lesson would enhance their perception of what actually goes on in a regular lesson, and, if their perception was enhanced, if student daily attendance would increase. Determining if changing parents' attitude toward school will increase student attendance is important. A United States Department of Education publication (1994) reports student absenteeism to be the first factor attributable to performance differences among students. Congruent research suggest that partnerships among parents, students and teachers are more important to student success than any other family statistic (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Hanushek, 1994).

With an ageless respect for the contribution of both school and family toward the educational process, it seems to follow that educators and parents might best participate together to produce evidence that weaves accountability into school/family partnerships. The purpose of the study was to determine if parent attitude toward school would change if they became involved with their child in typical classroom lessons and if that change would affect classroom attendance. Two research questions were posed: 1.) Can parent involvement in typical classroom situations change parents' attitude toward school? and 2.) Will school attendance increase if parents become more involved in the learning process?

Methods

The study named Parent Attitude Change Toward School (PACTS) was implemented during the1995-96 school year as an action research project facilitated by a professor of education in conjunction with seven volunteer elementary school teachers and 42 preservice teachers. The teachers taught four different grades, kindergarten, first, second, and fifth, housed in five different schools in an urban district of thirteen neighborhood elementary schools. One-hundred fifty students comprised the treatment classrooms. Each teacher planned carefully to ensure that activities were interesting as well as challenging, were interactive, and took into account both child and content. The preservice teachers were sophomores and juniors who volunteered to participate in the research project. Although they did not receive a grade, the University credited their transcript with notice of their participation in Faculty-Student Research. Preservice teachers were included in the study to: (1) team with students who might be alone during a parent involvement lesson, (2) engage the class after the lesson in order to give the teacher and parents a few minutes to bond, and to (3) witness the effects of school-family partnerships.

The university coordinator met with the pre- and in-service teachers once each month. The informal meetings were intended to take all involved toward mutual respect and

productivity. Each teacher met privately with the preservice teacher volunteer to lend him/her a hand in planning a 10-15 minute after-the-lesson activity.

To get parents to the lessons, invitations were sent. Whether produced on computers or made by hand, they always reflected the topic of the lesson. Parents/surrogates were invited into the classroom to team with their child in a typical classroom lesson for one hour one day each month. They were not spectators, but partners with the student--gathering and processing information, solving problems, and making decisions in meaningful learning situations. At each lesson parents sat next to their children. They were urged to join right in--talking, laughing, and working are part of learning. The research team took snapshots during every parent involvement lesson and hung them on the wall. Every classroom boasted a Family Wall as a reminder that what happens in the classroom is important. The lessons in which parents participated promoted the idea that learning is interactive and cannot be duplicated with make-up assignments.

Data Collection

Quantitative data included parent surveys of the treatment group and student attendance records for the treatment and control classroom students. Qualitative data were collected as teacher-researchers interacted with treatment parents and recorded comments made by parents during and after the classroom lessons. Some interviews were conducted with hand-held recorders.

Results

Qualitative results suggest that parents' attitudes toward school undergo a gradual positive change when parents become involved in classroom lessons. Between group comparisons of attendance records of the treatment and control groups indicate statistically significant difference at the .05 level. In all cases there were positive effects associated with parent involvement in regular classroom lessons.

Consequently, spring semester, 1995, a university-inservice teacher-preservice teacher team initiated a research project to create a Parent Attitude Change Toward School (PACTS) by including parents in a regular classroom lesson with their child once a month. Often parents come to school to watch a program, tutor, or volunteer. They do not come into the classroom and get involved with the most important aspect of school--the child's learning. In 1995-1996 the project operates in five different schools and involves 11 inservice and 42 preservice teachers. Qualitative results demonstrate not only a parent attitude change toward school, but also a student, preservice, and inservice teacher attitude change as well (Tables 1, 2, and 3). Classroom attendance is positively affected and a stronger sense of community is built.

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